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## Editorial

Tim Osborne

I must apologize to the members for the delay in Vol. 37 (1). It was at the printers in late January but due to unforeseen circumstances it was delayed until April. It also had a distortion error and a double entry of the map accompanying Holger Kolberg's ringing report, which was my fault. Not having a printer, I only work on my laptop and sometimes I cannot see what the final page will look like.

The rains are past and those birds dependent on insects have bred. The seed-eaters are enjoying the harvest and the large raptors are prospecting their nests as they also have lots of prey in the form of young birds. The Monotonous Larks are still singing their hearts out day and night on our farm. The African Scops Owls are also calling throughout the night. From our place we can hear 5 pairs, one of which is right outside our window. Funny how one gets used to natural sounds in the bush. When we come to Windhoek we cannot sleep with the car alarms, dogs barking and traffic, but here with a Scops calling all night we sleep right through.

From the Chairman's Report you will be able to see that the club membership is declining. If you want to keep the club viable you must also do your part and try and get new members to join.

There are a lot more sightings reported in this issue, which is a welcome change. Keep sending those in. So far this year we have added three new species to the Namibian list: Gull-billed Tern, Streaky-breasted Flufftail and European Blackcap (more on this species in the next volume).

## Conclusion

We believe this is the first record of American Golden Plover for inland Namibia, given the discussion above. American Golden Plover has, very rarely, been recorded on the Namibian coast with records at Walvis Bay and Swakopmund. According to Hockey (1997) all the accepted Southern African records are from the coast. This would thus be the first inland record of this species in Namibia and possibly Southern Africa.

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## Hadedda Ibis, *Bostrychia hagedash*, sighting in the lower Orange River

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Hadedda Ibis, *Bostrychia hagedash*, are common throughout southwestern, eastern and northern South Africa, although generally absent from the dry, western regions. Records from the dry, western region include Clanwilliam, Nieuwoudtville and Augrabies Falls (Maclean 1985 & 1993). *Bostrychia hagedash* is a species known to be increasing its range with its Southern African range known to have doubled during the last century (Tarboton 2001).

On 6 February 2004 at approximately 19h00, two Hadedda Ibis were observed in flight whilst uttering their distinctive and unmistakable “ha..ha...hadedda” call at farm Beenbreek bordering the Orange River to the west of Onseepkans on the Namibian side of the river. This site is approximately 200 km west (or down river) from Augrabies Falls and approximately 15 km east of the Onseepkans border checkpoint. According to Strauss (pers. comm.), the owner of the farm, they have been sighted in this area only recently – i.e. “last few years”. Simmons & Allen (2002) conducted a survey of the lower Orange River during the late 1990s and did not record Hadedda Ibis from Haibmond (east of Noordoewer) westwards. The last-mentioned authors note that the overall bird diversity in the Orange River, albeit relatively low, increases from east to west and ascribe this to the slower flow and warmer water downriver.

It would thus seem that the Hadedda Ibis is moving westwards, by following the Orange River and thus subsequently increasing their range. Irrigation of lucerne and vines along the Orange River undoubtedly results in preferred habitat frequented by this ibis. It will be interesting to note when they reach the Orange River mouth and habitats around Oranjemund.

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## Nest boxes for Namibia

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Over the last couple of weeks a number of people have obviously sensed a slight increase in humidity and may even have felt a drop of water or two... I assume this explains the sudden barrage of calls to find out how to build a nest box. Well...it may be a bit late by the time this article is published but nonetheless its about time I make public the magic nest box formula... hence here is the Hornbill Nest Box patent...happy building and many happy hours watching!!

### **Dimensions for two types of hornbill nest boxes**

**What to expect:** At Daan Viljoen Game Reserve this design was successfully used by Monteiro's Hornbill, Damara Hornbill, Southern Yellowbilled Hornbill, Grey Hornbill, Lilacbreasted Roller, African Hoopoe and Pearlspotted Owl. In the Omaruru area the same design was very attractive to Rüppell's Parrot, Violet Woodhoopoe and Redbilled Woodhoopoe.

**Unexpected squatters:** This design may be quite an enticer to wintering Nile and Rock Monitors, and if the entrance is easy to reach expect Rock Python too. If they become full of nest material over the years Tree Rats will burrow a network of chambers into it. Perhaps the nicest of all these visitors are Lesser Bushbabies, which were recorded in nest boxes in the Otavi area. But by far the least enchanting of all tenants must be African bees.

**Useful Tip:** By increasing the cavity entrance to 90 mm diameter you should entice Scops Owl, Cape Glossy Starling and its parasite Greater Spotted Cuckoo.

### **And whilst I am at it....Dimensions for *Parus* Tit Nest Boxes**

**What to expect:** In the Central Highlands this design has been very successful at attracting both Carp's and Ashy Tits. Other species that favor this nest box design are Scimitar-billed Woodhoopoe and Southern Greyheaded Sparrows.

**Unexpected squatters:** These have included wintering juvenile Rock Monitor and breeding Tree Rats.

### **Nest box parts:**

#### **The lid:**

Nest boxes are safe havens for breeding birds, as well as, the perfect breeding data logger. Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with taking a peep whilst the birds are breeding, or leaving the birds and box alone whilst the nest box is active, a nest box MUST provide some kind of accessibility to its contents. Be it to capture data on whatever is breeding inside it, satiate ones healthy curiosity or be cleaned once the breeding season is over (see box maintenance).

The easiest way to close and gain access to a nest box is by making use of wood screws on both opposite corners of the top lid (see illustration). This method has worked fine with Hornbills. But having said this, Hornbills have a compulsive ability to seal any crack and gap with their mud and faeces. The two-screw

method is practical if you are prepared to maintain your nest box in top nick. However, it does not prevent the lid from warping a bit over time, water and heat. A four-screw approach – one in each corner of the lid – may be the safest way to go if you do not have the time to look after your nest box well, or if you only plan opening it a few times.

The top of the box is often the preferred platform from where to operate by most nest box predators. Making the lip of the lid longer than the top of the lid you may thwart most predatory intentions, provide some shade over the entrance hole and even rain-proof the entrance. However this technique does not fully favour Hornbills, which enjoy using the lids when conveying food to the female.

### **The nest box aperture:**

Several studies around the world have demonstrated the evolution of a millimetrical selection for the perfect hole entrance among a suite of cavity-nesting species. However during the Hornbill study years at Daan Viljoen Game Reserve a vast suite of different body-sized cavity-nesting species were recorded using the nest boxes, which suggests that cavities in Namibia are in high demand and short supply, forcing the market to be less exigent about the size and shape of their homestead entrances.

For Tits the entrance hole should be 35 mm and for Hornbills, Rollers, and Owlets an aperture of 60-65 mm in diameter is recommended. Larger apertures of 90 mm, seem to attract Starlings, Greater Spotted Cuckoos, Pearlspotted and Scops Owls, Purple Rollers and Hoopoes.

### **The nest box base:**

A practical alternative for cleaning the box without having to dislodge it every year from the tree is to make use of a removable base. This can be made to fit the bottom of the nest box and screwed on its sides by a series of wood screws. By unscrewing the bottom base all nesting material and parasites may be easily removed.

### **Type of wood:**

I found that Meranti wood, commonly used in construction sites for concrete frames and scaffolding purposes, works best. Its relatively tight grained, yet easy to cut, nail and screw things into. Its fairly termite resistant and if treated,

very durable and almost indestructible. Its hard graining prevents it from soaking up water, warping and/or rotting. I found that SA Pine did not last as long, unless it had been varnished and sealed with acrylic paint. Only extra thick SA Pine (27.5 mm) has thus far given similar long-lasting results.

### **Nails or screws?**

To assemble the box I prefer using nails, the reason being that screws seem to cause the wood around its grooves to rot and eventually to dislodge by warping and become loose and the nest box falls apart. I only use screws for securing removable components of the nest box such as the base lid and the top lid.

### **Nest box maintenance:**

As all things subjected to the rigours of nature, degradation is an ever-happening process. Whilst it can not be avoided, it can however be slowed. Nest boxes do not need much maintenance, nonetheless you can double their lifetime with a minimum maintenance care.

- Building your nest box carefully and ensuring you achieve tight seams and giving the box several coatings of outdoor varnish or acrylic paint would be highly recommended.
- Check your nest boxes annually after the breeding season and gauge which ones need to be fixed, re-nailed, re-lidded, re-varnished, etc.
- Keep your nest boxes relatively clean of old nesting material.

Following on the latter point I would like to add that some nest material is good but too much can be lethal to your nest box's health and appeal. Old nest material decays and becomes "humus", which in turn is very water retentive, and will cause the nest box bottom to rot. Soaked nesting material will also place unnecessary strain on the holding wires, especially after rains.

The decline in appeal is borne from the fact that old nest material is heaven to mites, fleas, larvae and a whole suite of undesirable bloodsucking fauna which most birds try to avoid.

It is important to "empty" and "disinfect" the nest boxes straight after each breeding season.

### **Nest box placement:**

The need for breeding cavities in the Central Highlands is so great that there are few factors that affect occupancy of the box. I often get asked what are the dos and don'ts when placing a nest box. An analysis done throughout my study to verify what were the perfect nest box emplacement factors, showed that in Namibia a hole is a hole and is as good as any other hole. However, allow me to feed you some gut feel and tell you what I think makes a slightly more safe and comfortable hornbill abode....

### **Height of nest box:**

A recommended height is 1.5-2 m from the ground, a comfortable height that allows you to operate the nest box, when checking it, cleaning it, etc. High nest boxes have the inconvenience of tricky access but if the tree is of easy climbing, high boxes are as good as any other cavity.

### **Box support**

It is always very tempting to place nest boxes on branches that come out horizontally from the tree. Boxes are heavy and when placing them these branches provide huge muscle relief, but as tempting as it may be, be warned that resting boxes are the most likely to be predated. It is OK to use a stump or a knob as a support but any box that has a branch across and in front of its base will provide excellent support to predators willing to pry out the plug, or, enlarge the nest box entrance.

Rather make sure that boxes hang freely, attached by wires to the main stem of the tree and that gaining access to the nest box entrance is a challenge to predators such as Monitor Lizards, Tree Rats, etc...

### **Wiring**

A good wire to attach the nest boxes to tree trunks is 2.5 mm bending wire. This material is pliable and easy to cut through.

I generally use double strands, one just above the entrance hole (never below) and another 5-10 cm from the base of the nest box.

The illustration on page 18 explains how to link up and tighten the wires and nest box to the tree.

There is no need to tighten the nest box excessively. Firstly, the wire can and will snap with excessive turning and tightening; and secondly, the tree is a living organism that will grow, expand and contract over the season depending on rains...so it is advisable to leave a little bit of play and allow the nest box weight to tighten up the strands. Grooves on the wood where the strands wrap around the corners may prevent the box from slipping off, alternatively u-shape nails are also handy.

#### **North, West, South, East?**

The hornbill study detected no predilection for any cardinal position, however placing boxes facing N-S will guarantee that the nest box receives a bit more than normal sunlight through its day.

#### **Shadow or out in the open?**

Boxes placed in such a way that they are shadowed most of the day seem to provide a more comfortable breeding and growing environment to its occupants. It also means that they are somewhat protected by the canopy from direct rain. The avoidance of direct sun will prevent excessive drying of the wood, bleaching of paint or varnish and subsequent warping of the wood.

#### **Straight up or at an angle?**

Although it does not really matter if you have a lipped lid that prevents predators from reaching the nest hole, a slight forward bending inclination keeps water out, makes predators' lives more difficult and does not seem to impair the male hornbill's ability to feed.

#### **Expecting the worse:**

After all your hard work and slog in the field I must warn you that your nest box is now advertising living space to a suite of species that may not necessarily be birds and that you need to somehow expect....

By far the most cunning and ruthless of all enemies to nest boxes are Chacma Baboons, and although I have not experienced them I would imagine Vervet Monkeys would be just as harmful. Baboons are endowed with enough strength to rip nest boxes apart and off trees, even if attached with various sets of double stranded bending wire. They can rip off lids, side panels, and bend screws as if they were play-dough. They are intensely clever and if you ever feel their presence

whilst you are about to open a nest box, I suggest you bail your intentions, as after you they will follow and their curiosity is rather destructive.

Dry, droughty winters are the worst for nest boxes as baboon's will exhort their searching resources and often look inside the nest boxes for whatever they may contain, inflicting serious damage to the nest box. During the breeding season both birds and baboons seem to find food easier and boxes are often left alone. However, excessively noisy broods of hornbill chicks are often too much of a temptation to pass by.

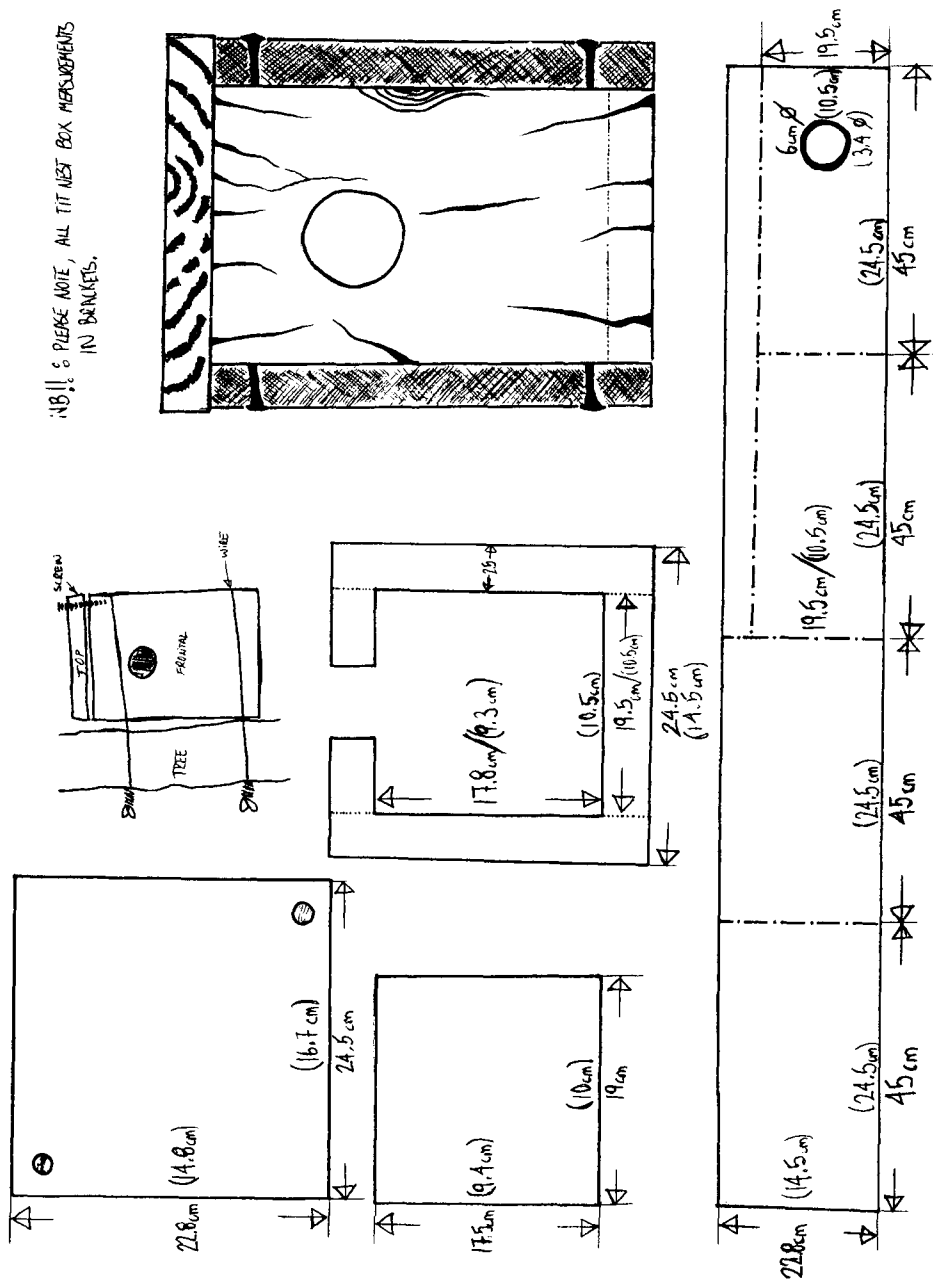
Nile or Rock Monitors, find nest boxes to be safe and cool retreats. They are also opportunist predators, yet prefer to predate on nest boxes full of hornbill females and eggs, and not so much when there are chicks.

Monitor lizards are easy to shake off if you follow the basic nest-hanging instructions provided in this article. But if you really want to make their day a misery, make sure the wires do not provide any grip for their short claws and allow the lid to have a lip long enough to bar them a platform from where to operate.

Tree Rats as darling looking, as they are nest rats, and can be both predatory and rather difficult squatters to shake off. Unbelievable as it may seem, I have had a rather tenacious male rat killing an entire brood of hornbill chicks (12-18' days old), in an attempt to take over the nesting space? Once rats are in, they are in to stay. They are prolific breeders, gregarious and they have the tendency to fill up your nest boxes with thorny branches and chewed up bark, which they then urinate over and allow it to cement into one big black, smelly and chunky rat-nest clump.

Finally, there is one more intruder that needs to be pre-empted and that is the African Killer Bee. They normally take tenancy of nest boxes in midwinter, following splits of existing swarms or the destruction of their old hive by fire. Getting rid of bees is not difficult, but does require professional help. There are many beekeepers in Namibia who will gladly come and collect your bee colonies from your nest boxes, simply because they are so easy to transport and extract.

!NB!! PLEASE NOTE, ALL FIT NEST BOX MEASUREMENTS IN BRACKETS.



## Sociable Weavers nesting on a cliff-face

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Sociable Weavers *Philetairus socius* usually build their nests in trees, favouring *Acacia erioloba*, *Boscia albitrunca* and *Aloe dichotoma*. When trees are not available, they use telephone poles, windmills and electricity pylons.

In 2002 on NamibRand Nature Reserve (2515Bb), I discovered a new colony with 12 nests on a calcrete conglomerate overhang. There are some *Commiphora glaucescens* on the hillside opposite the nest. According to Maclean (1993) and Tarboton (2001), the weavers "rarely" nest on cliff faces. Mendelsohn and Anderson (1997), state that "locally nests are constructed on cliff faces, e.g. at the Asbestos Mountains southwest of Griekwa-stad" in South Africa.

To my knowledge, this is the first documented case of Sociable Weavers nesting on a rock overhang or cliff in Namibia.

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### Undercover larks

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During 2003 I had the chance to observe heat avoidance behaviour in Spike-heeled Larks *Chersomanes albofasciata* which I had not seen, heard of, or read about previously, of any other Southern African lark. The behaviour was observed on three different occasions (February, September, November) whilst birding in Etosha National Park during 2003. The first two sightings (Feb & Sept) were recorded on the plains heading towards Leeubron (north of Okaukuejo), the